Promoting racial harmony

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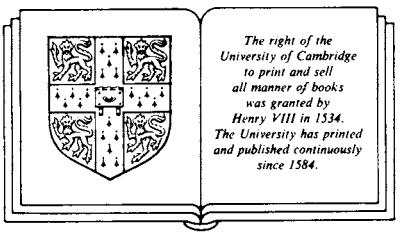

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The constraints of nature

Some countries, like Brazil, Mexico, Barbados and Kenya, have multi-racial populations without having a 'race problem', as that expression has conventionally been used. In one sense, racial problems have their origins in people's minds, in their beliefs and assumptions about the significance of differences of skin colour, hair form, and so on. Racial discrimination can be seen as a product of the popular consciousness of racial differences. Since that consciousness takes such different forms from one country to another, any student is obliged to come to some opinion – even if only tacitly – about how such differences arise.

Every scholar and every political activist must work with some philosophy of history, with some set of assumptions, explicit or implicit, coherent or incoherent, as to what is important in human affairs. Those who are Christians may read the historical record as the progressive revelation of God's relationship to his creation. Others may believe that a reader can find lessons in history only because his mind has been taught to look for particular things, or because he is studying a tale which a historian has put together so as to convey the lesson which the historian believes can be deduced from the record. According to this view, people read significance into history and the evidence itself is neutral. Put crudely, it is a philosophy which believes history to be simply 'one damn thing after another'. Those who subscribe to it may be attracted to the conclusion that Edward Gibbon expressed after writing *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*; he said that he could find in history nothing but 'the register of the crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind'. Part of anyone's philosophy of history will be assumptions about the nature of man and the extent of his freedom to fashion his own future. These assumptions will often be associated with people's political outlooks. A powerful element in the conservative outlook is the belief that it is only natural for men to do evil, a belief that finds vigorous expression in the doctrine of original sin. Radicals, by contrast, have

taken over the eighteenth-century romantic tenet that immorality is the product of faulty social organization since man is naturally moral. This leads on to the view that men do not slaughter or brutalize one another unless they are influenced by some ideology which either impels them to behave in this way or furnishes excuses for so doing. The liberals see elements of truth in both these outlooks, but put their stress on the mediating power of institutions. According to this interpretation, United States soldiers would not have slain babies in Vietnam had they not been conditioned to obedience and rendered insensitive to the consequences of their actions. Experiments by social psychologists have indeed demonstrated that ordinary people are prepared to endanger the lives of others when they see the responsibility as lying with the experimenter.

Assumptions of this kind will affect people's opinions about the kind of racial harmony to work for, and the way to do it. A political tactician will want to define an objective so that it is shared by the largest possible number of people, and it was obviously sensible for the Labour government in 1965 to attack racial discrimination as contrary to national ideals. It is not meant as a criticism to call this a negative policy, one aimed simply at eliminating an evil. The government could properly say that once the barriers had been broken down people would be free to form whatever social groups they wished, and it was none of the government's business to say whether they should mix themselves up or remain as separate communities so long as they had the freedom to choose. Others would reply, however, that the historical record shows that people do not easily give up their routines of custom and habit, that social structures set further limits to choice, or that prejudices will remain in the private realm long after discrimination in the public realm has been brought to an end. Some of the alternatives people would choose would prove not to be viable; others look more promising and it is these, so it would be said, that people should be encouraged to select.

Three views of these matters deserve special attention. The first treats popular consciousness of race as the product of human genes; the second as the product of competition between nations; and the third as the product of the capitalist mode of production. The three views have been presented as theories that can be tested in the same sort of way as the theory of natural selection. Such claims are contested, but whatever conclusion be reached about the scientific status of the arguments there is no doubt that they can be used as philosophies of history stressing respectively the predominating influence upon events of the factors of

race, nationality and class. To the extent to which anyone is attracted to these views so he or she will see race, nationality or class as an important constraint upon the likely success of any policy for promoting racial harmony.

The racial thesis was propounded in the middle of the nineteenth century in the form of an assertion that there was a limited number of permanent racial types, each with distinctive capacities suited to a particular continent or region of the world. Darwin's demonstration that there were no permanent forms in nature destroyed this claim. A very different version was propounded in 1931, and with great elegance, by the anatomist Sir Arthur Keith. In the course of his rectorial address to the students of the University of Aberdeen, he described what he considered the ingenuity of nature in the original organization of group relations:

> She had arranged it on a competitive basis; each tribe was a team engaged in the eternal struggle to obtain promotion and avoid relegation. Our modern masters of football have but copied the scheme of competition which Nature had set up in her ancient world. Her League of Humanity had its divisions – racial divisions – white, yellow, brown, and black. Tribes constituted her competing teams. No transfers for her; each member of the team had to be home-born and home-bred. She did not trust her players or their managers farther than she could see them! To make certain they would play the great game of life as she intended it should be played she put them into colours – not transferable jerseys, but liveries of living flesh, such liveries as the races of the modern world now wear. She made certain that no player could leave his team without being recognized as a deserter (Keith, 1931: 34–5).

In this vision there are two central propositions. First, though there are many races, nations and regional groups, and occasionally one disappears or gets absorbed by another, the number of these groups is finite. Secondly, to which group or groups any particular individual belongs is determined by the processes of natural selection. Nature is organized for the evolution of new and better races of mankind. Selection can take place because there is variation in the genes inherited among any human population: those genes which are less well adapted to the perpetuation of that group in its particular environment are, over time, eliminated by natural and by sexual selection; other genes are favoured.

The characteristic of a team is that the members share ends, or objectives, and organize their activities so as to attain them. In this sense their ends, or some of them at least, are integrated. According to Keith, integration is achieved by the operation of natural selection, so that

while some players may be disloyal and not play hard enough, over the course of time those teams well supplied with the genes that produce team-spirit will be favoured. The obverse side of team-spirit is antagonism towards opposing teams, so that racial and national prejudice are seen as serving an evolutionary function. Racial and national sentiment are onlv superficially different manifestations of what are represented as underlying biological processes, but since for most people the adjective racial better represents biological processes, Keith's theory can be described as one which declares the constitution and interaction of groups to be a matter of race.

The second philosophy of history's teams takes nation as the key unit. It was first put forward in a modern form by Walter Bagehot in a book entitled *Physics and Politics, or Thoughts on the Application of the Principles of 'Natural Selection' and 'Inheritance' to Political Society*. As the subtitle indicates, Bagehot had been reading Darwin. He concluded that two forces had been responsible for the creation of the major differences between the branches of mankind; during the period of antiquity there had been a race-making force which 'has now wholly, or almost, given over acting', yielding place to the nation-making force (1873: 86). Not all nations progress. From the study of the characteristics of the progressive nations, Bagehot deduced three laws, the first two of which were of most importance:

> First. In every particular state of the world, those nations which are strongest tend to prevail over the others; and in certain marked peculiarities the strongest tend to be the best.
> Secondly. Within every particular nation the type or types of character there and then most attractive tend to prevail; and the most attractive, though with exceptions, is what we call the best character.

Thus Bagehot, like Keith sixty years later, saw human affairs as the product of laws governing the nature of relatively large units. Nation and race could overlap. Membership of such units was, for Bagehot, determined not just by inheritance but by the constraints of geography and history upon nation formation and by the social processes which caused particular types to prevail. These processes included the development of political and legal institutions (for Bagehot had been reading the work of Sir Henry Maine as well) and the ways in which psychological impulses were channelled, particularly the 'unconscious imitation and encouragement of appreciated character', for 'there is always some reason why the fashion of female dress is what it is' (1873: 97, 89). The formation of type, or national character, is therefore both a

matter of unconscious national selection and one of 'custom-making' or, in present day speech, of culture. Individual choice is constrained by the wider social processes but, since these reward cooperation, human history can be seen as the progressive development of human capabilities.

A third view acknowledges that teams may appear to be based on racial or national identity but asserts that these appearances are misleading and that ultimately the deciding criterion is that of class. Karl Marx maintained that the players recognize rules governing competition between teams but do not at the outset understand the principles which decide for which teams they should play and who are their true opponents. Initially there are few permanent teams, but gradually it is appreciated that what matters is the process of production and the way that people at different points in ths process share interests in opposition to people at other points; they learn to play for their class. To start with there are lots of classes (Marx referred to eleven in France and Germany in the late 1840s and the list was not meant to be complete), but their number is progressively reduced as the underlying divisions come into view. Sections of the ruling class are precipitated into the proletariat. The small traders of the lower middle class discover that their interests speak against any alliance with the capitalists. So the quarter-finals and semi-finals are fought; cross-cutting ties that bound diverse groups are stripped away until society is polarized and ready for the cup final in which the proletariat is bound to conquer. The capitalists attempt to postpone this day of reckoning by encouraging the production of ideologies which justify the prevailing order and delay the rise of proletarian class consciousness. They seize on the physical differences between populations and the sentiments of solidarity among people sharing common cultures to elaborate doctrines of racism and nationalism.

This answer, like the previous two, contends that while there are many kinds and sizes of groups, one kind is of particular importance in human history. Like them, it accords little importance to bargaining. At any one moment of time the number of such major groups is finite but the number is gradually being reduced as part of a unilinear process. Social classes are not created by the subjective perceptions of individuals looking at the differences of social status between themselves and their neighbours; they are the units of which history is built. Though individuals may be perverse or deluded they are gradually brought to appreciate that their membership in a class is of surpassing importance to them.

The 'theories' of Keith, Bagehot and Marx are, among other things, attempts to account for the course of history. They assert that among the many factors which influence what happens in history, one particular kind of grouping tends to dominate the others. There are, of course, serious difficulties in the path of any such argument if it is expressed in such simple terms. On the one hand, since human history is unique it is impossible to prove the truth of claims about its determining forces. On the other, it is impracticable to separate factors like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle. The racial idiom has been powerful in the West because it was launched in the nineteenth century as a way of explaining the pre-eminence in world affairs attained by peoples originating in Western Europe, and it was the more plausible because 'race' was used in a way that overlapped with 'nation'. In other parts of the world today, such as in Southern Africa, race is often thought to overlap with class. While stressing the significance of class formation, the classic Marxist writers like Lenin accepted nations as natural groupings; they would have considered any attempt to compare the relative significance of national and class sentiment as misconceived.

Philosophies which see race, nation, class or some other kind of grouping as having a special influence upon the course of history all look at history in the long term. Those who subscribe to such views accept that in the short term a multitude of other factors influence behaviour. In pursuit of their private objectives individuals form an infinite number of groups of very varied character; some of them, like the institutions of government for example, are relatively permanent so that each new generation is constrained by structures created by its predecessors. They in their turn strengthen or weaken features of these institutions so that there is a continuing process in which groups are formed, maintained and dissolved. Social scientists study many aspects of this process. Psychologists, for example, have learned a great deal about perception, memory, personality patterns and how these interact with social conditions. Economists have constructed a sophisticated conceptual structure for analysing the implications of different kinds of decision about the allocation of scarce resources. Political analysts have their techniques for examining public opinion and calculating its relevance to electoral programmes. The list is a long one. What should be stressed at this point is that social scientists can obtain a kind of knowledge about the things they study which is of a different order from most kinds of historical knowledge.

Social scientists can to some extent control the variables influencing

the things that are of interest to them. Sometimes they can experiment. Quite often they can, if they wish, measure the objects of their study, either by using an accepted criterion, such as money value, or by devising a special scale. They may be able to advance their understanding by comparing what happened in one set of circumstances with what happened in another. They can do this because their objective is not to obtain an exhaustive understanding of what they study but only to understand certain features which are of particular significance in the light of the theory or theories they are seeking to test, apply, or extend. This reduces the influence of subjective judgement and makes it possible for one research worker to try to replicate another's findings. The checking of others' findings occurs in the historical field also, and in view of the great variety of historical study it is unwise to make more than a modest claim for the distinction. In some fields within history, particularly in the earlier periods, factual information is limited and offers little scope for alternative reconstructions, but the general characteristics of historical writing are its chronological rather than theoretical framework, and the breadth of its criteria of relevance. All sorts of considerations can be relevant to understanding why a particular event took place, why it assumed a particular form and had particular consequences. The greater the breadth of focus the more the resulting knowledge is affected by subjective perceptions and reconstructions. From this standpoint the distinction can be seen as a continuous scale. At the end are psychological experiments of a kind that could equally well be carried out in biological science laboratories and which yield what may be called positive knowledge. At the other end are broad historical surveys which for their character depend very much upon the interests and sensitivities of their authors. For other purposes it can be helpful to think of the distinctions as relating to different levels of knowledge, though there is much disagreement about the nature of these levels and the relations between them.

Evolutionary theories, like that of Sir Arthur Keith, represent human behaviour as the product of causes operating on several different levels. The highest level is that of culture, the realm which organizes the interpretations that people place upon their experience and which vests different kinds of behaviour with special meanings. The forms taken by culture are influenced by their environments and in particular by the economic organization which enables people to exploit the natural resources around them, so one or more levels underneath the cultural one may be distinguished in the effort to identify the ecological causes of

behaviour. The ability of humans to utilize their environment depends in part upon their psychological make-up, their intelligence, learning power and ability to make the most of their inherited potential – which includes their physical constitution; one or more levels can be added to take account of these. The psychology and zoology of *homo sapiens* can be seen as the product of the nature and distribution of human genes, which in turn are constituted from biochemical components. Evolutionary explanations maintain that some, but not all, of the observations made at each level can be accounted for by the principles used to explain observations at the next level down. This is usually called a reductionist explanation because it reduces the problems of one level to those of the next by reformulating them in terms of the concepts used at the lower level. Thus the disapproval of sexual relations defined as incestuous may be explained as the expression of a biological imperative to avoid inbreeding. Yet even so, certain unexplained questions remain, such as: why should legislatures find it necessary to enact laws against incest and why should the definition of forbidden relationships vary from one society to another? The unexplained observations are called the remainder. How big the remainder is varies from case to case, but reductionists are inclined to believe that as scientific knowledge grows the remainders at every level are progressively diminished. They see their theory as scientific, as based upon and yielding positive knowledge, in contrast to the subjectivist approach of conventional historians.

The chief modern exponent of Keith's view is Pierre L. van den Berghe, a sociologist in the United States; he has elaborated it at some length, employing concepts taken from socio-biology. Kinship is of central importance, for if people help their kin they are helping the genes which they share with their kinsfolk to survive and to increase in future generations. In this way the willingness of people to help their kinsfolk is said to be genetically determined. Ethnicity can be seen as an extension of kinship and accounted for in a similar manner, racial prejudice being regarded as a positive feature because it helps each group develop its genetic distinctiveness. The argument cannot be faulted on logical grounds but there is little evidence about just how much behaviour at each level can be explained in terms of the influences operating at the next level down, and good reason to suspect that the remainder at each level is far too substantial for any reductionist theory to be, on present information, any more than a set of hypotheses that require many years of detailed investigations before they become relevant to the discussion of social problems.

Bagehot's theory was an evolutionary one, but he maintained that what would now be called the genetic determinants were of little power compared to the psychological and social forces enabling nations to mobilize political power. This concern with the nation as a social unit of special significance has been given extra significance in recent times by the creation of so many new states and by the attempts of some ethnic groups inside states to be recognized as independent nations. One who shares the concern is Mr Enoch Powell, though he may well see the existence of nations as part of the working out of God's purpose for mankind. For him, a nation must be independent; its members must be willing to die for it; they must have a consciousness and a conviction of belonging together and of being at one with their forebears who defended the territory they have inherited. Nations which fail to recognize the conditions for their existence disintegrate, and no other large social unit can bind people together so effectively.

In nineteenth-century writing, nation and race were often interchangeable words. For a group to be considered a nation it had to have a territory so that a state could be established to govern that territory in accordance with the wishes of the nation. In the twentieth century there have been attempts to fashion a sense of national identification based upon the possession of a common culture rather than a common territory. Such an enterprise has obvious relevance to Afro-Americans who are a population greater than that of Norway, Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands combined. In Britain the argument is often advanced in discussion that racial harmony cannot be attained on the terms of white people who regard a black or brown complexion as a misfortune. For there to be harmony there must first be equal dignity. Black and brown people must be able to identify contentedly with some bigger culture-bearing social unit just as white people do. Thus it has been asserted that adoption agencies must seek to place children for adoption with adoptive parents who have the same racial and cultural origins as the child, thus maintaining an identification of race with culture in spite of the general recognition that culture is transmitted by learning (see *The Guardian*, 26 January 1983). This sounds like a kind of cultural nationalism which could contend that racial harmony requires a recognition of the United Kingdom as a multi-national state containing not only an English, Welsh, Scottish nation but also a black and possibly one or more Asian nations (what the status of Northern Ireland would be in such a scheme is a further problem throwing another light onto the problem of group definition).

Marx took many of his philosophical ideas from Hegel, who believed that while men could acquire positive knowledge by experimental methods they could also gain access to a more comprehensive knowledge by locating observations in an understanding of human development. Marxist writers generally assume that the realm of historical knowledge is superior to that of positive knowledge for the pursuit of what Westerners call social science. According to this view, any uniformities discovered by psychologists, economists and political scientists are valid only for particular historical epochs. Even more important is the principle that any research worker in these fields should first understand the laws of social development so that he can act like a midwife to history in hastening the advance of the progressive forces. He or she should select a research topic with this aim in mind. This view does not allow for the possibility that the research worker might discover that the alleged laws of development are wrong. For all important purposes the traffic goes in one direction alone. It can be useful to view the ferment in modern Western Marxism as reaction against such propositions. Marx only claimed that the social superstructure was brought into line with the economic base in periods of revolution; in between such periods political and cultural institutions could enjoy a relative autonomy. Moreover there is room for argument about whether even this proposition should be treated like an article of faith. Many of those who draw inspiration from Marx' writings would reject any one-way view of the relations between historical and positive knowledge, insisting that by their research they can improve upon Marx' understanding of historical change.

Contemporary sociologists who stand in the Marxist tradition (e.g. Miles, 1982) have brought a special force to the argument that no scholarly study of the conflicts between groups identified by race can take for granted popular beliefs about the nature and significance of racial differences. If sociologists are to write about racial groups they must base their conception of race upon something more secure and precise than the vague and shifting assumptions of popular consciousness. However, simply to maintain that the underlying forces are those of class formation is inadequate in view of the special characteristics of racial politics. When racial features are used to identify and enforce differences of status this introduces a greater rigidity than is found in class politics. Status is transmitted from one generation to another and social mobility blocked in a more comprehensive and inescapable way. The range of alternatives open to an individual appears to be subject to

an additional constraint. Where racial identifications become a basis for political alignment the normal processes of democratic politics as these are understood in the West are undermined because there is then no floating vote (the instance of Northern Ireland shows that this feature of racial politics is not limited to situations in which political alignment is associated with physical difference). An important feature of the democratic process is that groups with different objectives and of different political strength negotiate with one another. But when the rights of a group are protected by the constitution (as in the disputes over French Canadian rights and over the electoral privileges of whites in Zimbabwe) its members may refuse to negotiate because any revision of the original settlement is certain to reduce their rights. The belief that class is ultimately the most important influence is no more vulnerable to disproof than the corresponding beliefs about race and nation and it may furnish no solution to the analysis of problems in the short and medium term.

Different views about human nature and the lessons of history structure peoples' ideas about what kind of racial harmony is possible and what are the conditions that permit its growth. The oppositions between some of the contending arguments discussed in later chapters have their origins in differences of this kind. Yet in other areas of social policy (like the six cases mentioned in the Preface) conflicts of political philosophy have not prevented the introduction of new policies. Perhaps it is more difficult for the various parties concerned about policies for racial harmony to negotiate with one another about their differences? The next chapter therefore descends from abstract level of dispute about the interpretation of history to discuss the means used by groups when they seek to advance their shared interests.